

Tales Out of School

By way of epitomizing the agnosis syndrome, let's try to find the common denominator between two of its apparently most unrelated advocacies—phonics and anti-Communism. As an educator specializing in language learning, I believe I understand the practical effects of emphasizing phonics in school, which helps in turn to figure out why people who exalt it to a religious status also interpret the Bible literally, build bigger weapons, segregate races, go “back to basics,” and prefer to be “dead than Red.”

Phonics is a method of teaching literacy by presenting the spelling of each phoneme of the language at the same time the phoneme is sounded. Alternative methods teach this paired association between the sounds and the spellings by employing larger language units—the whole word, the whole sentence, or some continuity of sentences—units, we note, that contain successively more meaning. Thus the child is shown a word while hearing it pronounced (“look-say”) or follows with the eyes a simple text as someone reads it aloud (“read-along”) or dictates something and watches as the other person writes the words down (“language experience”). For decades reading experts have quarreled acrimoniously over these methods, because the size of the *language* unit employed as the *learning* unit determines the amount of message, meaning, and hence motivation that a method can summon.

At its extreme, the controversy has raged between the phonics camp and the “reading for meaning” faction, a needless polarization fueled periodically by inflammatory polemics like Rudolph Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read* (because phonics is not taught) that never stop cursing the opposition long enough to reflect seriously on the host of sticky factors within and among individuals that alone can account for success and failure in literacy. Invariably, these polemics blame literacy failure on some *method*, whereas in fact a single method is rarely used to the exclusion of others and even when done so is not done so universally enough to account for a national result. Moreover, method alone would hardly ever make the difference between success and failure.

Blaming illiteracy on a method steers conveniently clear of parental and other social factors that play a large role in any language learning because of the basically social origin and function of language, which is first learned, after all, in the home. Consider habits of TV and video-games as well as the increase in single-parent families. Also, this criticism fits the familiar pattern of some parents defensively blaming schools for their children's behavior. Schools should of course take on as much responsibility as possible for teaching literacy. I too have criticized schools for the way they go about it, but I believe they have erred in the direction of overdoing phonics under pressure not only from parents but from technocracy, which prefers the particle approach because it lends itself readily to mechanical programming and cheap testing.

In my textbooks and workshops for teachers I recommend interplaying these four main literacy methods according to individual children but to favor the whole-sentence and whole-text methods and to regard phonics as probably not necessary for reading, if the alternatives are fully employed, but as helpful for spelling and writing. Many children have learned to read and write splendidly without any phonics at all, but what makes the issue murky is that schools have seldom worked out the classroom management necessary to afford each child plenty of "read-along" and "language experience." Because these alternative methods to "look-say" and phonics seem more difficult to mount in a conventional classroom, they have been used less — which is my criticism of schooling — with the result that phonics and "look-say" have been used more and, though perceived by conservatives as rivals, have actually borne together most of the responsibility for poor literacy results, to the extent that methods do count.

When Elmer Fike rails against "look-say" as the culprit, according to conservative tradition, he speaks as a champion of phonics, whereas in fact the mainstay of schools for years has been the infamous "basal readers," which long ago perfected a blend of look-say and phonics by preteaching whole words for a story lesson and following this up with workbook drills on sound-letter relations. The problem here is that these two methods emphasize the smallest units of languages — syllables and isolated words — and this more technical and mechanistic approach makes it harder for children to associate reading with meaning and to tie into natural motivation to master literacy. Following a text while hearing it read, and dictating while watching the words being written down, engage more of the child's faculties and enlist more fully the will.

What I always found curious is that some laymen should not only take an interest in a particular teaching method — which is fine in itself — but should elevate it to a national cause. Whereas teachers who fight over these methods may champion phonics for purely professional reasons

not related to their other beliefs – they could be flaming liberals politically – almost invariably parents and others not having these professional reasons side with phonics because it suits a conservative cast of mind.

“God believes in the beauty of phonics” means that those who see themselves as God’s spokespeople prefer phonics, precisely, I think, because it shuts out content by focusing the child on particles of language too small to have any meaning. In other words, what phonics really amounts to for those who are sure they have a corner on God’s mind but are very unsure of being able to hold their children’s minds is *another way to censor books* (unconsciously, of course) *by nipping literacy itself in the bud.*

An overemphasis on phonics, to the virtual exclusion of alternative methods, which is what these proponents desire, especially when it is part of a general back-to-basics approach replete with technocratic programming, is a fine formula for increasing functional illiteracy. Phonics tests test phonics. They do not show if a person really can read and will read later. But they are called “reading tests.” The fixating of children’s attention on meaningless letters, inherent in phonics, combines only too well with the lack of choice in school reading matter and the general arbitrariness and dullness of other content required in school to discourage youth from reading. Teaching methods and school routines can and do express the public’s true attitude toward knowledge.

Literacy has from the beginning enabled individuals to liberate themselves by permitting them to bypass the oral culture, the local group, on which they would otherwise have to depend for knowledge. Serfs can bypass masters, merchants the government, Christians the priests, and children their parents. Literacy is dangerous because books bring minds together across the limits of time and space. Books build broader identities. They give access to that planetary perspective so feared by the part of us clinging to lesser group identity. Once literacy supplants or competes with oracy, we may “lose our children” to other ways of thinking.

Through school censorship one can control only some of the reading matter students may encounter. How to limit what they may find to read *out* of school? A good way is to cripple literacy at the outset, to make reading so technical and meaningless that youngsters will, especially after sampling the lifeless basal readers and other sanitized pabulum often served for them in school, simply not seek books any further or will find the act of reading so painful that they virtually give it up. I accuse no one of doing this deliberately, but I think the unconscious fear of letting youngsters *acquire* knowledge, on their own – of putting this dangerous tool into their hands – explains the true cause of the popularity of phonics, which is increasing as our nation regresses deeper into apprehensions of disorder.

As it is for phonics in particular, so it is with "basic skills" more generally. Like "fundamentalist," "basic" makes a claim for precedence or priority, for some primacy owing to deeper truth or broader scope or higher goal. But just as "fundamentalist" turns out to mean "literal," so "basic" as applied to school skills turns out to mean "rote." Going "back to basics" means emphasizing even more than in the past the three R's of reading, writing, and arithmetic, to which we have to add the learning of an arbitrary miscellany of deeds and dates from history and odd facts from nature. These are not hard and not the real issue.

What these "basics" share in fact, and what defines them, is memorization. Reading is reduced to phonics; writing to spelling and punctuating and (irrationally) labeling parts of speech; arithmetic to tables and set steps. All of these can be memorized, are not difficult, and entail little thought. Furthermore, if these little facts, along with those of history and science, were taught embedded within the thinking processes they are intended to serve, they would be learned faster and better. Going "back to basics" means stripping facts of context and purpose in order to drill on them in isolation. By making them so dull and meaningless to learn that they have to be retaught endlessly, it is possible to pretty well fill up the curriculum so that students never get to use their higher minds or to learn how to learn on their own.

This approach short-circuits higher thinking and higher aspects of consciousness. Thus as with phonics and reading, all while making a great show of emphasizing the things that count most—the "basics"—one in fact very effectively cripples the true basics—how to use the mind, communicate, acquire knowledge for oneself, and create.

This is surely a perversion of *anyone's* values, but it is happening daily across this land because fear perverts. It seems like hypocrisy to claim to feature literacy but in fact be sabotaging it, but again, this kind of pressure on schools from many parents, not just fundamentalists, represents unconscious motives stemming from agnosis. In fact, for many people education is not the real goal of schooling. They want school to continue the indoctrination of home, a goal literacy may thwart. But then, unwitting self-contradiction characterizes the state of mind reflected in agnosis and awaits a self-perception which is also part of what one doesn't want to know.

Along with most other English educators I know, I have struggled for years to supplant exercises in formal grammar with actual writing experience, but the grammar mystique operates so powerfully in the mind of much of the public that teachers, specialists, and superintendents all go along with it whether they believe in it or not because they don't dare to buck a tradition so solidly lodged in the public psyche. This mystique was forcefully invoked in the book objections, which complained that

literature was taking up room that should be allotted to grammar study. Literature is dangerous and grammar safe. Like other reading, literature has subject matter; like phonics, grammar does not.

During the nineteenth century, when a large immigrant population flooded American schools, for whom English was a second language, there may have been some sense to teaching grammatical analysis, but practical experience of the classroom and special research on the effects of grammar teaching both have for a long time shown clearly that such instruction does not improve a student's speaking, reading, or writing but, by displacing the practice itself of these activities, does actual harm. Among English educators, researchers, and linguists there is broad consensus about the futility of parsing and diagraming and labeling, whether the grammar be old-fashioned or newfangled. Nor is there any *logical* reason to think that these artificial exercises should be able to affect long-conditioned speech habits.

Nearly all grammatical "errors" are deviations made by a whole speech population, not personal mistakes, and the best way to learn standard dialect is to speak with native speakers of it, that is, to learn it the way anyone learns the basic grammar of a language as a child. Negative thinking decrees, however, that instead of children acquiring this way an additional dialect, they will all end up speaking a nonstandard dialect, fear of which animates segregationists as much as anything even though all the evidence shows that the nonstandard speaker adopts standard dialect when integrated. Thus segregation works against solving the very problem the agitation is supposedly about, "bad grammar."

The other main benefit that formal grammar study was alleged to confer was a greater facility with sentence construction for more effective oral and written expression, but the practical way to improve these is to discuss and write more, to read a lot, and to exercise the thinking processes. As it is, most "composition" in American schools is not authentic writing but fiddling with given material, doing dummy drills, or plagiarizing. A major reason American children write poorly is that they are seldom asked actually to author.

Again the pattern is plain. Many parents push hard for teaching methods that are vacuous and innocuous. Grammar teaching is a red herring. Its unconscious purpose is to fill time and thus to *prevent* practice in speaking and writing, thinking and growing — as do phonics and rote drills. Like reading, writing is dangerous if youngsters truly take it on as a personal tool. If content comes from the students, as it must in a successful writing program, adults lose control of it. So instead of inculcating planned subject matter, adults find themselves fostering independent investigation. Control of subject matter is the key. A very successful movement to teach real writing has been under way since the mid-seventies, but the more this promising trend takes hold the more signs of parental anxiety appear. I

predict, in fact, that the next surge of censorship will concern student writing, which has rarely been criticized before only because it was mostly neglected or limited to some sort of writing about the reading. Controlling reading material effectively constrains the subject matter of writing, thus killing two birds with one stone. Students who really author outgrow just being somebody's children.

It is not mere cynicism on my part to say that perhaps the majority of the American public wants its children to spend school time doing false busywork. It is a way of putting children on hold, in suspended animation, so that they will remain as we made them, as if children *belong* to parents. It took me years of work in curriculum development to understand that schools are as negative as they are because they are doing just what much of the public thinks it wants (and what many teachers themselves do not believe in). I naïvely thought that improvement just waited on better ideas. My first perception that change was balked by politics and public relations came when I saw of what tough psychological stuff was made the irrational obstinacy behind formal grammar teaching. Then I began to see how other teaching "methods" likewise existed for noneducational reasons, for antieducational reasons, in fact.

Grammar in particular, moreover, is tied in with social distinctions. A shibboleth was originally, in the Bible, the test word that the Gileadites used to detect the escaping Ephraimites, who could not pronounce the initial *sh*. Like color and physical features, speech is a quick way to tell who is us or them. As a teacher I have noticed that the people most concerned about grammar teaching are those whose speech betrays non-standard grammar and pronunciation, who have newly arrived or are living on a social margin. Stigma is trauma, but fear of being outcast or miscaste must not be allowed to dictate negative school practices. Ironically, it is mixing that overcomes the dialectical differences that call such painful attention to social discriminations. Behind the apparently academic issue of grammar stalks the omnipresent specter of identity.

Like "back to basics," the book objection called "invasion of privacy" masks its very opposite and appeals far beyond the book banners. The fact is that the kind of "traditional" school that many parents want truly does invade a youngster's privacy by the regimentation, the indoctrination of official views, the standardized curriculum, the manipulative methods, the infernal and incessant testing, and the imposition of silence, immobility, and passivity. All this violates normal human functioning, not to mention civil rights. (The only adults so treated are soldiers, criminals, and the insane.) To all this some parents would add a dress code, saluting the flag, and other niceties of submission and conformity.

Forced continually to do many things one does not want or need or see the value of, placed for years on end in the role of responder to others' planned stimuli, minted into a coin like other coins in a national technoc-

racy – these constitute the real invasion of privacy, not the providing of means for youngsters to look inside and express themselves. Making someone read censored books merely increases that violation. Proponents of school prayer would invade privacy even more. School prayer is not forbidden in school, as people like Fike claim, since anyone can pray virtually any time, but rather it is forbidden for schools to *institute* a prayer because that will mean organizing a group activity and hence imposing a time, place, setting, leadership, and, very likely in some places, a particular religion.

Unlike mere biasing of reading selection toward some ideology, the very format and procedures of traditional schooling invade privacy virtually every moment and aspect of a student's school day. While focusing on controversial books, we take for granted classroom conditions that affect students more profoundly than what they read there. The direction of *this* bias is toward uniformity and mental arrestation as desired by that aspect of the human being that does *not* want to know.

"Invasion of privacy" expresses an opposition to self-examination, to allowing or inviting youngsters to look at what they think and feel and to express some of this. I object to self-examination and self-expression too if they are forced, but it is clear that people applying this term would never make room in the curriculum for activities enabling youngsters to discuss and write their own ideas at their own choice. As I've indicated, the real intent of the popular emphasis on the mechanics of language – phonics, spelling, punctuation, grammatical analysis and rote drills – is to make sure that language is not used for those purposes of finding out and speaking out for which it principally exists.

To channel and illuminate feeling, to sharpen and enrich thought, a learner must have opportunities to plan and carry out projects, engage in open discussions, read widely, write many different sorts of discourse, solve problems, build things, and generally be free to apply mind and speech to internal and external matters. When children are permitted to do these things, it becomes impossible still to control their thoughts.

In one of his novels called *Giles Goat-Boy* John Barth has a character say, "Self-knowledge is bad news," a humorous way of expressing why nearly anyone might want to avoid self-examination. "Invasion of privacy" reveals its true meaning only when considered along with what is perhaps the most common objection to books – the presence of what is called morbidity and depression, violence and cruelty, profanation and lust, all the main negative emotions. Parents who fear negative emotions within themselves sense that their children contain the same things and don't for a moment want anyone to know what is going on in there. To the extent that we feel we are sitting on the lid of a seething cauldron we oppose self-examination and self-expression. We may prefer stone boys and girls.

Self-distrust brings on this denial. If we feel our own potentiality for morbidity, violence, or lust lies close to the threshold of action, we may feel we have to deny it by refusing to look inside. But since these forces cannot really be ignored, we become vigilant — for signs of them *outside*, in others, in books. We project. Instead of taking the view that examining and expressing ourselves may be ways to defuse, manage, and transform negative potentialities, we assume, with a fatalistic lack of faith, that we cannot allow any turning inward, that we are incapable of dealing successfully with our emotions. One *expects* the insides to be wicked and dangerous — a superlative form of negative thinking that constitutes itself the real danger, because denial forces us to act out rather than work out dangerous feelings. Parents seriously inclined this way intuitively know that they have acted out negative emotion on their children and that, as a result, their children have bottled up a lot of explosive passion themselves. Child abusers are usually children of child abusers. Invasion of privacy indeed.

We who are brought up to regard ourselves as sinners falling short of the high moral standards constantly reiterated around us are often forced into denial as a defense against the awful and imminent possibility that we are terrible persons, no better in fact than beasts. (It becomes most important then to dissociate oneself from animals.) Having never succeeded in fulfilling the moral code, judging from beratings or beatings, we feel basically hopeless and hapless (morbid and depressed). If timely self-examination and appropriate self-expression never become available to us, we must spend half of the time denying and projecting our feelings — censoring these violent, depressing, lustful books will banish our violence, depression, and lust — and the other half acting out the feelings in defiance of all that collective coercion and in the spirit of “I’ll bloody well be myself, whatever you others think.” (“Rugged independence.”)

If some teachers have probed children and tried to require them to look inward, I suggest they may sometimes have done so because it is very difficult to manage a classroom containing very many pent-up, acting-out children. They often become the “behavior problems” who don’t learn and who hinder other children. Typically, children suppressed at home vent their rage in school. Overly strict parents vaunt their children’s obedience but don’t see the hell they raise away from home.

Truly spiritual upbringing has ever insisted on examining oneself. To be moralistic is not to be moral. Both Protestants and Catholics have promulgated ways of scrutinizing one’s inner life, sometimes alone as in meditation and sometimes with a counselor or confessor and sometimes in frank group sessions. Similarly, in secular circles psychotherapy has continued these traditions through individual analysis and group interactions. Much ordinary peer talk such as the teenager’s telephone soul

talks and the housewife's coffee klatch accomplish needed introspection as participants exchange feelings and react to the others' feelings. It is a terrible inversion to use "invasion of privacy" to defeat "know thyself."

Working in tandem with this inversion is another—construing "Jesus saves" to mean that one does not need to work at knowing oneself and mastering oneself because Jesus takes care of everything for you. (Recall the misinterpreting of "Journey of the Magi.") Regardless of what one believes or professes, it is not possible to be moral without understanding oneself. To advance this understanding in school it is not at all necessary to question children about themselves; reading and writing and discussing will accomplish this quite appropriately if content is not dictated or censored and if these basic activities are not crowded out by meaningless busywork. After all, it is as much for self-understanding as for anything that books and talk and writing exist.

What do these ways of refusing to know have to do with the lack of faith that sees Communism and Darwinism as excessively threatening? This returns us to the hanging question about the connection between phonics and anti-Communism, which necessitated a tour of the classroom from our special viewpoint of agnosis and limited identity. Phonics can be used to decorticate reading by making it meaningless. This ultimate censorship prevents the individual from bypassing the oral knowledge and teachings of his or her group, with whom alone he or she is supposed to identify and from whom alone he or she is supposed to draw knowledge. The deification of phonics and the fulmination against Communism both serve to maintain in-group unity, the one by limiting knowledge and the other by limiting identity.

Precisely parallel to the fear that children may repudiate the parents' teachings if exposed to authors holding other values is the fear that citizens of our country will jettison national principles if made aware of other ideologies. What explains this lack of self-confidence, of faith in what one believes? Why trust in a free-enterprise marketplace of material goods but not in an open marketplace of ideas?

Communists espouse three ideas abhorred by their enemies—atheistic materialism, collectivism, and internationalism. These collide, respectively, with Christianity, the "rugged individualism" of free enterprise, and patriotism, three central identities for many Americans. As the phonics war is not what it seems, neither is the anti-Communist crusade. By making reading a technical matter instead of a means of knowing, phonics fanatics neutralize it below while prating of three R's above. By attacking materialism, collectivity, and internationalism in the Soviet world, anti-Communists give the impression that these three traits do not characterize our own society, whereas it is precisely because of similarities that Communism can serve as a handy psychological target for projection.

Leaving materialism to last, let's consider collectivism first. Any tendency toward agnosis and the group mind is collectivistic and will find expression in customs or institutions, whether these be of the official government or not. Defying federal regulation does not make one any less collectivistic if one behaves unthinkingly as a member of a group. Conformity to a subculture rather than to a larger society is still conformity. But, to deny that one depends tremendously on others and feels real only in the parent group, it may seem necessary to denounce some form of collectivism as it manifests in an outsider society.

Ironically, capitalism today has nearly become, through corporate conglomeration and collusion between government and industry, as collectivistic and monopolistic as Communism, which has moved toward capitalistic marketing and private ownership of business, not only in China and some Iron Curtain satellites but even, more recently, in Russia itself, where Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms in this direction were strongly ratified in June of 1987 by the Communist party's Central Committee. Collectivism takes many forms in different societies, sometimes in the public sector, often in the private, but nearly always expressing the same needs of the individual for the group. Mass media, vast technocracies, and drifts toward standardization characterize our whole society. It becomes academic to quibble over which part of the society the pressure to conform is coming from. But identity maintenance requires the exaggeration of differences between us and them.

Regarding internationalism, I have remarked earlier that rightists despise the United Nations, which extremists regard as a Communist instrument. (In an ABC film of 1987 much discussed as a sop thrown to conservatives, *Amerika*, the U.S.S.R. has taken over the U.S. after softening by liberals and an occupation by U.N. troops.) The very viability of independent nations is being tested today by international forces of all sorts, some beyond the law like international crime and terrorist organizations that have their own governments without a country, some within the law like multinational corporations and cartels and the intricate webs of global monetary and trade interactions, which run well beyond the control of any nation but affect all nations. America has been made up of course of immigrants from many nations since early days and is today even more of an international nation than ever within and more than ever extending influence around the world. The more that these and many other indicators of planetary integration increase, the more patriotism is reaffirmed by those who feel their identity threatened by them. The fact is that nations are on the way out even as some are still emerging. While it may be emotionally satisfying to place blame for this on the Soviets, it is these other forces that will compel the transcending of nations, not the U.N. and Communism.

Their insistence on differences blinds anti-Communists to the increasingly homogenizing effect that world developments are having on all countries, enemies or not. And the more enemies contend with each other the more they resemble each other. This is a paramount but overlooked law of war. Surely, Americans need to reflect on the fact that the facet of our psyche so opposed to Communism as to risk war to “contain” it most resembles the Communist in behavior. It restricts thought and speech, bullies outsiders, supports discrimination against minorities, enforces conformity, and, most significantly, bases ego strength on group identity defined by enemies.

Even the Communist’s materialism is shared by anti-Communist fanatics, but this is a pervasive issue that requires a long-range orchestration of motifs to bring out. Certainly, taken at face value, fundamentalism takes a strong stand against materialism both as selfish, physical desires and as repudiation of soul, divinity, and a higher impalpable reality governing the tangible world. It’s of no small significance that, as a modern movement, fundamentalism was born during the period when Darwin and Marx began setting the framework for the twentieth century, on which Freud and Einstein built.

Darwin said we evolved from lower animals. Marx said our history is about competition for money. Freud said instinct (mostly sexual) determines our behavior. All three philosophies place humankind at the mercy of material and mechanistic forces in our environment and in our nature and exclude reference to transcendent or spiritual dimensions to life. Then Einstein had to come along and cap it all, the absolutist feels, by making a whole blooming theory out of relativity. Others were following suit—the logical positivists saying no statement could mean anything, Heisenberg announcing his Uncertainty Principle, Dewey winning a generation of educators with his Humanism, and the Existentialists picking up Nietzsche’s “God is dead” and preaching that humans must rely only on themselves and not on a Big Sky Father.

Indeed, to the extent we lack faith we could certainly take all this as the forces of materialism drawing on to a victory and feel some strenuous apocalyptic drum-beating is definitely in order. I do not myself accept Darwin, Marx, Freud, or any materialistic doctrine as more than a sort of truth limited by its very materialism, but I think materialism *is* coming to a head—for purposes of a spiritual evolution which it is serving. These four figures have played masterful roles in raising consciousness to higher levels than before. For one thing, they have helped people understand better just how, precisely, we are trammled in the webs of matter, how automatically nature and society may program us to act, and how we chronically delude ourselves.

What is following on the heels of all these revelations are realizations that we do not have to let ourselves be biologically programmed or historically trapped or environmentally conditioned—materially mired. The concepts of Darwin, Marx, and Freud are being refined and elevated, fused with more recent knowledge to synthesize an understanding more likely to enable people to attain the ideals to which we have aspired but fell so short of as to acquire only more guilt.

The fundamentalists are not wrong to reject the materialism itself, but anyone is mistaken to scorn the knowledge such thinkers contribute, for their insights help to avoid moralizing against materialism while at the same time falling into its pitfalls. What affinity we have with animals, how much history is a mean struggle for money, how much we blindly act out instinctual drives—these are all up to us. These geniuses may have accurately described only the human past or the habits of the great majority, not the ultimate potentiality. Everything depends on being conscious enough to acknowledge our past enslavement. As the spiritual master Gurdjieff taught, liberation can come only after full acknowledgment of our automatism and our sleep.

As for Einstein, he was always metaphysically inclined and has helped enormously, like some other twentieth-century scientists, to make apparent that crucial aspects of our universe are not visible and tangible, even with the aid of sophisticated instruments, but can be apprehended only nonmaterially, through mathematics and other purely mental means. His formula converting matter to energy— $E=mc^2$ —broke open the way for us to understand the physical world as a condensation on our lower plane of reality of subtler, incorporeal forces on higher planes. Walk into any bookstore featuring John Birch or other very conservative or fundamentalist materials and you will find books specifically aimed at refuting Einstein's work. He has become the new Darwin.

The theory of relativity does not destroy universal truths. It is one itself. But because human understanding is imperfect in our present state, our formulation of laws has to be constantly revised as we evolve, as Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Einstein undoubtedly expected their theories to be. "For *now* we see through a glass, darkly; . . . *now* I know *in part*." The "universal truths" just keep getting more comprehensive as we integrate our understanding of the world and evolve in consciousness. Most people will surely pass through Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Einstein on their way to higher truths because, mired in matter, we have to climb up through matter. Some rare souls may indeed bypass them and other worldly means, but you will not likely find such persons banning books, interpreting the Bible literally, calling us "back to basics," or arming against the Commies.

Darwin threatened identity with change, evolution epitomizing in fact, by the altering of even species themselves, the specter of nothing staying put so you can count on it. Marx threatened customary identity by placing transnational classhood over church, state, and family, three key bases of traditional membership. Freud threatened identity by showing that we are not who we seem to be, that under the conscious self and social figurehead there lives another person or persons with features and motives of which we usually remain unconscious. Einstein threatened identity by proclaiming that what is true depends on the vantage point of the observer, whose own being cannot of course be exempt from this general relativity. "Things are not what they seem—including you" seems to be the message of all four. This is actually a spiritual message, because it breaks the veneer of mundane matter, refuses to believe the world of appearances, points beyond local differences, and bespeaks a higher reality than the solid objects we cling to for stability. But to the extent we feel we must identify ourselves as concrete and fixed, the idea that things are not what they seem arouses a terror bordering on the preternatural.

The censor-bigot part of us sincerely attacks materialism and insists on universal truths. But it understands spirituality materialistically and universality parochially. It is not wrong. It parodies the evolved soul as the child parodies the adult. It has a right to its own level of expression of divinity, its own stage of the spiritual journey. We are all burlesquing the Supreme Being. But the fundamentalist in us must learn that what it believes is final is only provisional, because only so much can it grasp now. Darwin, Marx, and Freud—and Einstein too—*do* have to be outgrown sooner or later. Life no doubt *is* simple once you have attuned to the highest plane of it. Much knowledge *does* focus on negativity and distract us from the ultimate reality. We *shouldn't* clutter our minds with the infinite multiplicity of social information and physical facts. Laws of action and laws of knowledge *are* related, because living right is living in accord with cosmic laws. But these laws are surely not learned through limiting but by identifying most comprehensively—cosmically.

With this ultimate identification, we are told, the individual consciousness partakes of cosmic consciousness and so achieves that direct and full knowledge called gnosis. To their credit, the underlying concern of the book objectors was religious. But what stands in the way of gnosis, the goal of all religions, is agnosis, which is the blocking of consciousness, as anesthesia is the blocking of the senses and amnesia the blocking of memory. How far consciousness may expand depends very much on how widely the individual identifies across humanity and the rest of nature.

The ego is a social artifact based partly on cultural differences. Dissolve the distinctions on which it is constructed and you undermine it. Since all but the rarest souls identify the ego in turn with their body,

people feel this assault on ego as physical dying. Understandably, then, to the extent our ego identity depends on sex, race, nation, religion, or ethos, we will fight to the death the erasing of those distinctions.

But defense is a losing game. Perpetual mobilization of an individual or a nation squanders resources. To defend against the Other is to ward off higher consciousness. It alone is equal to dealing with the world's conflicts, which stem, precisely, from our social need to limit knowing and identifying. How to save one's soul and how to save the world are the same. The spiritual way is the practical way. As we identify so we know. Only by identifying with the culture-free and cosmic nature of a Christ or Buddha does one learn what they tried to teach us and assume their power. This means molting lesser selves.